

## School district tests a creative strategy

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A Northwest Portland affordable housing building will host an unusual tenant in its storefront space: a public school. Portland Public Schools will lease ground-floor space in the Pearl Family Housing development, scheduled to open in spring 2011, for an elementary school.

The unique arrangement could serve as a model for future development, school district officials say. With the difficulty in predicting population growth and the expense of buying land and building new schools, leases and creative partnerships could become more common.

Portland Public Schools doesn't rent any of its school buildings, spokesman Matt Shelby said. In fact, it leases out buildings to other schools, such as Riverdale Grade School in Southwest Portland and De La Salle North Catholic in North Portland.

But population doesn't increase only in the neighborhoods with extra school space. And the growing northwest neighborhoods still have only one traditional elementary school: Chapman Elementary School.

Chapman has an average of 25.2 students per class, said district spokesman Matt Shelby, compared to the district-wide average of 24.3.

"That school is already at capacity," Shelby said. "If you're building new units, they don't have the room to accommodate new students."

In the past, when crowding merited another school, the district built one. After all, why rent when you can own?

"Those two options are not apples to apples," school board member David Wynde said. "A new school is millions of dollars, and we don't have the money at this point."

The school district's five-year lease on the Pearl Family Housing space costs \$1.5 million. It also buys the district time, Wynde said.

"At this point, it is not clear to us the numbers are there for a new school in the River District, but reasons are there to believe there might be," he said. "This allows us a course of action so we can determine the level of demand more realistically."

If Pearl Family Housing lives up to its name, the project will bring demand with it. The 138-unit building is mostly two- and three-bedroom units, designed to attract young and growing families, developer Ed McNamara said.

The project is part of a surprising development trend in the neighborhood, McNamara said. "There's a lot of affordable housing, probably more affordable housing than any neighborhood in the city," he said.

"At one point, there had been about 6,000 new units built since 1994, and 1,800 of them are affordable housing."

Developers are realizing that families with children want to live in the Pearl, McNamara said. They're not moving out as their families grow.

"Children are staying," said Nancy Davis, who is working to move the Zimmerman Community Center into a Pearl Family Housing space next to the school. "My son was born in 2003, and children born that year didn't tend to stay (previously)."

The community center commissioned a study of the area's population trends in 2008. Findings included that 252 children lived in the River District, bounded by Interstate 405, West Burnside Street and the Willamette River. Birth rates also are increasing.

Children in lower grades, probably kindergarten through second grade, will attend the Pearl Family Housing school, Shelby said, although details haven't been worked out yet. That will take pressure off of Chapman, which will continue offering the higher elementary grades.

The new school won't have all the features of a traditional school, Wynde said. There won't be a library, gymnasium or cafeteria, for example. "In this case, we acknowledge that this is a pilot program," he said.

"It's not the same range of amenities a full school would have. It's an interim measure to meet the needs of kids."

Davis said it's important to put the facilities in a neighborhood context. "If you compare the school in Portland Family Housing with private schools, they don't have libraries or gymnasiums or some of the amenities, and parents are paying \$10,000 or more for their children to go there," she said.

Students who attend school downtown have access to several libraries, museums and even a riverfront as an outdoor classroom, she said. "It's a pretty impressive campus, so to speak."

Increasingly, especially as capital budgets remain tight and tied up in renovation projects, Portland Public Schools will need to look at neighborhood partnerships, Wynde said. The newest elementary school, Rosa Parks School in North Portland, has a Boys & Girls Club built in. An agreement with Portland Parks & Recreation allowed for use of a gymnasium across the street.

The school district would almost certainly need partners for a future district-owned school in the Pearl, Wynde said. "If we were to determine there is a population in that part of town that would cause us to build a school, we're going to need to be pretty creative, because land is at a premium. And that will be a challenge."

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